POST-LIBERAL ORDER

REGAN O'SULLIVAN

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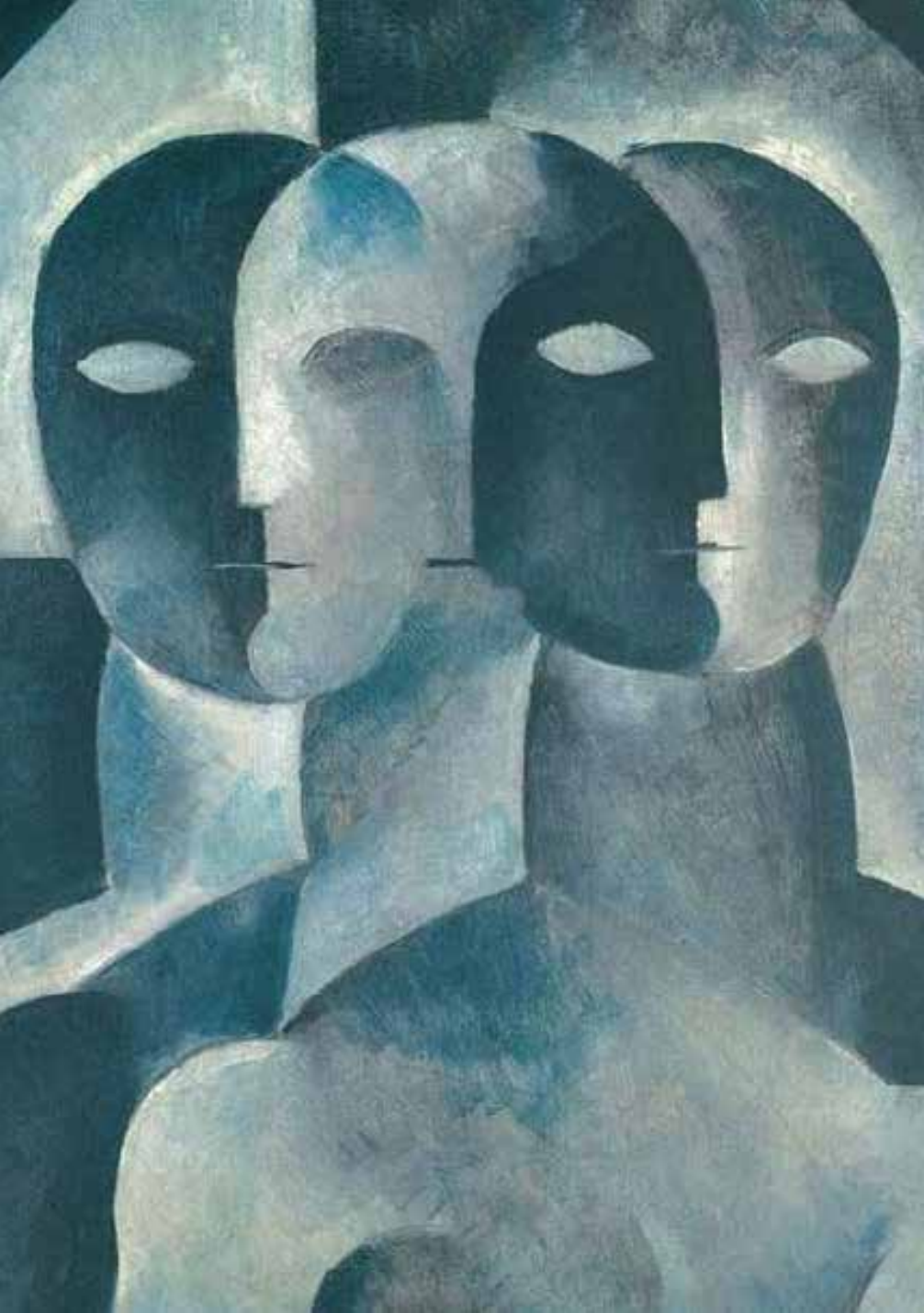
Contents

Introduction	7
The end after the end	11
The hybrid regime	19
The Visegrád formula	26
The new right's pragmatic revolution	34
The revolt of the Anglosphere	41
The new national contract	48
Family values, political power	55
The garden's unruly borders	62
The border within	68
The west's new political weather	76



Introduction

For much of the past three decades, the world appeared to have settled on a political formula. Liberal democracy, open markets, globalisation and international institutions were not merely seen as one possible arrangement among many; they were treated as the inevitable destination of history. The collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to confirm that the great ideological contest of the 20th century had ended, leaving behind a model built around free elections, free trade and increasingly interconnected societies.

That confidence has now weakened. Across continents, a new political mood has emerged, not a rejection of democracy itself, but a challenge to the assumptions that shaped the post-Cold War era. The emerging order is neither a return to authoritarianism nor a simple revival of old-fashioned national-

ism. It is something more complicated: a political hybrid combining electoral legitimacy, economic protectionism, cultural conservatism and a renewed emphasis on national sovereignty.

The term "post-liberal" does not necessarily mean anti-democratic. Rather, it describes a growing dissatisfaction with liberalism's dominant interpretation of politics: the belief that individual rights, international cooperation and market integration should always take precedence over collective identity, traditional institutions and state authority. Its supporters argue that the liberal project became detached from ordinary citizens, creating societies where economic growth benefited some regions and social groups while leaving others feeling ignored.

The new political movements emerging from this frustration have different faces. Some advocate "economic nationalism", arguing that governments should protect domestic industries, control strategic resources and reduce dependence on global supply chains. Others promote socially conservative agendas, defending national traditions, religious heritage and traditional family structures against what they see as rapid cultural transformation. Yet many of these movements still operate through elections,

campaigns and popular mandates, presenting themselves not as opponents of democracy but as its defenders against distant elites.

This transformation reflects a broader crisis of confidence in the institutions that defined the previous era. Globalisation brought cheaper goods, technological innovation and unprecedented economic connections, but it also contributed to industrial decline in some communities and increased anxiety about migration, identity and social change. International organisations, once symbols of cooperation, are increasingly criticised as unaccountable structures that limit national decision-making.

The rise of the post-liberal order also reveals a paradox. The same societies that criticise liberal globalism often rely on the freedoms created by liberal democracy: competitive elections, independent media, private enterprise and civil organisations. The challenge is therefore not simply whether these new movements reject the old system, but whether they can reshape it without undermining the foundations that allow political competition itself.

History suggests that political orders rarely disappear overnight. They evolve through periods of

crisis, adaptation and conflict. The post-war liberal settlement survived economic shocks, ideological battles and geopolitical tensions because it offered a compelling vision of stability and prosperity. But no political arrangement remains permanent. Changing demographics, technological disruption, economic insecurity and cultural divisions have opened the door to alternative models.

The emerging post-liberal order is still unfinished. It is not a single ideology with a fixed manifesto, but a collection of competing ideas searching for a new balance between democracy and authority, markets and protection, individual freedom and collective identity. Whether it becomes a renewal of democratic politics or a gradual retreat from liberal principles will depend on the choices made by voters, leaders and institutions.

The next era of politics may not be defined by a battle between democracy and dictatorship, as the 20th century was. Instead, it may be shaped by a more subtle struggle: what kind of democracy societies want, and how much of the liberal inheritance they are willing to preserve, reform or abandon.

The end after the end

For a brief and dazzling moment, history appeared to have settled into a comfortable routine. The collapse of the Soviet Union did more than conclude the Cold War; it seemed to resolve the ideological argument that had dominated much of the twentieth century. Liberal democracy, married to free-market capitalism and increasingly bound together by international institutions, looked less like one political option among many than humanity's final destination. The old ideological battlefields had been cleared. What remained, many believed, was merely the technical work of expanding prosperity, refining governance and extending the liberal order to every corner of the globe.

It was a remarkably optimistic assumption. It also proved remarkably fragile. A quarter of a century lat-

er, the confidence that once surrounded liberal internationalism has evaporated with astonishing speed. The political landscape across Europe, North America and increasingly beyond no longer resembles the triumphant world imagined during the 1990s. Elections revolve around borders rather than markets, identity rather than integration and sovereignty rather than global governance. The vocabulary of the age has shifted. Globalisation, once spoken with almost religious reverence, is now discussed alongside vulnerability, dependency and inequality.

The story is often presented as a sudden populist revolt. It is nothing of the sort. It is the accumulated consequence of disappointments that liberal democracies consistently underestimated.

Economic growth did not disappear after the Cold War, but its rewards became increasingly uneven. Entire industrial regions across Britain, America, France and Germany experienced decades of decline while financial centres accumulated extraordinary wealth. Manufacturing jobs migrated abroad. Communities built upon heavy industry watched their economic purpose quietly dissolve. Successive governments promised retraining, innovation and the benefits of an increasingly interconnected world. For

many citizens, those promises translated into temporary employment, stagnant wages and diminished expectations.

The financial crisis of 2008 transformed dissatisfaction into disillusionment. It exposed not merely weaknesses within global finance but contradictions at the heart of liberal capitalism itself. Governments that had spent decades preaching fiscal restraint and market discipline suddenly mobilised unprecedented public resources to rescue financial institutions considered too important to fail. Banks survived. Many ordinary households did not.

Trust, once lost, proved difficult to recover. Economic grievances alone, however, cannot explain the present political realignment. Prosperity has always fluctuated. Liberal democracies had weathered recessions before. What distinguishes the current era is the convergence of economic insecurity with profound cultural uncertainty.

Mass migration, accelerated by conflict, demographic change and global mobility, transformed the social fabric of many Western societies within remarkably short periods. For political elites, diversity represented economic dynamism and moral prog-

ress. For many citizens, particularly outside prosperous metropolitan centres, rapid demographic change generated concerns over identity, social cohesion and national continuity that were too often dismissed as ignorance or prejudice rather than recognised as legitimate political questions.

Similarly, debates surrounding multiculturalism, gender, national history and collective identity evolved from academic discussions into defining electoral issues. Institutions that once claimed political neutrality increasingly embraced explicit cultural positions. Universities, corporations, media organisations and public administrations became participants in ideological debates rather than observers of them.

The consequence was not merely political polarisation but institutional scepticism. Many voters ceased believing that traditional governing elites represented their interests, values or experiences.

The liberal internationalist project depended upon more than economic growth. It rested upon a particular understanding of identity. Citizens were encouraged to think simultaneously as members of nations and participants in an increasingly integrated

global order. Sovereignty became shared rather than absolute. International law increasingly constrained national decision-making. Markets transcended borders. Human rights acquired universal rather than exclusively national significance.

This framework functioned effectively while globalisation appeared universally beneficial. Once that assumption weakened, every component of the liberal consensus became vulnerable to challenge.

What has emerged is often lazily described as populism, as though it were merely an emotional reaction against modernity. That characterisation misunderstands the nature of the transformation underway. Across much of the democratic world, an alternative governing philosophy is gradually taking shape. It is neither a resurrection of twentieth-century fascism nor a simple return to post-war conservatism. It represents something more adaptive and, therefore, more durable.

Its economic programme rejects both socialist planning and unrestricted global markets. Strategic industries deserve protection. Supply chains require national resilience. Energy security overrides environmental idealism. Industrial policy has returned after decades of ideological exile.

Its political philosophy elevates national sovereignty above supranational governance. International institutions remain useful where they serve national interests but lose legitimacy when perceived to override democratic accountability. Borders become expressions of political authority rather than unfortunate administrative necessities.

Its cultural outlook favours continuity over perpetual reinvention. National traditions, historical narratives and inherited institutions regain political significance precisely because they provide stability amid rapid social change.

Importantly, this emerging counter-ideology does not reject democracy. On the contrary, it frequently claims to restore democratic responsiveness by reducing the distance between governing institutions and national electorates. Its supporters argue that political authority should flow downward from voters rather than upward from international bureaucracies, courts or expert commissions.

Whether one finds this persuasive or alarming is almost beside the point. Its rise reflects genuine political demand rather than temporary protest.

The liberal establishment has frequently inter-

preted each electoral upset as an isolated anomaly. Brexit was exceptional. Donald Trump's victory was accidental. The rise of nationalist parties across continental Europe represented temporary frustration. Yet anomalies repeated often enough cease to be anomalies. They become evidence of structural transformation.

Indeed, liberalism's greatest vulnerability may have been its conviction that history itself had validated its permanence. Political systems, like financial markets, become most fragile when they mistake favourable conditions for immutable laws.

History never ended. It merely paused long enough for one generation to believe that ideological competition belonged to the past.

The world now entering view is neither a restoration of the twentieth century nor a complete rejection of liberal democracy. Instead, it is becoming an era defined by competing democratic models: one rooted in global integration and universal norms, the other emphasising national sovereignty, strategic economics and cultural particularism.

This is not simply an electoral contest. It is a contest over the meaning of political legitimacy itself.

The liberal-internationalist identity that shaped the post-Cold War era has not disappeared. It remains influential across governments, universities, corporations and international organisations. Yet it no longer commands the unquestioned authority it once enjoyed. It must now compete against an increasingly coherent alternative that derives its strength from precisely those failures liberalism once considered impossible.

The age of ideological certainty has ended. Ironically, that may be the clearest proof that history has resumed its work.

The hybrid regime

There was a time when political commentators reached for familiar labels with reassuring confidence. Governments were either liberal or authoritarian, democratic or dictatorial, nationalist or internationalist. Populism itself was often treated as a temporary electoral fever, a style of politics rather than a durable system of government. That comforting intellectual map has become increasingly obsolete. A new political order is emerging across different continents, borrowing freely from seemingly incompatible traditions while rejecting the ideological consistency that once defined political movements.

Calling it merely "populism" understates both its sophistication and its ambitions. The defining feature of the new hybrid regime is not ideological purity

but strategic flexibility. It speaks the language of democracy while steadily weakening democratic institutions. It embraces free markets when they benefit political allies and state intervention when it serves national interests. It condemns global elites while eagerly cultivating domestic oligarchs. It presents itself as revolutionary while appealing to an idealised vision of a mythical past.

Its genius lies precisely in its contradictions. Traditional populism divided society into two opposing camps: the virtuous people and the corrupt elite. That narrative remains central, but it has evolved into something considerably more durable. Elections are no longer merely opportunities to gain power; they become moral referendums that supposedly grant unlimited authority to whoever claims to embody the "real nation". Once victory is achieved, institutional checks and balances are portrayed not as democratic safeguards but as obstacles deliberately constructed by hostile elites.

Democratic legitimacy is thus transformed into permanent political licence. This is where authoritarianism quietly enters the picture. Unlike the military dictatorships of the twentieth century, today's hybrid governments rarely abolish elections or openly

suspend constitutions. Such crude methods are unnecessary. Instead, independent courts are gradually weakened. Civil services become increasingly politicised. Public broadcasters evolve into government mouthpieces. Electoral rules are adjusted incrementally. Universities, cultural institutions and regulatory bodies are subjected to ideological scrutiny.

Each individual measure appears administrative rather than revolutionary. Taken together, they fundamentally alter the character of the state.

This process is often described as authoritarian neoliberalism, although the economic dimension deserves closer inspection. Classical neoliberalism championed open markets, deregulation and global integration. The hybrid regime selectively embraces these principles only where they reinforce political power. Strategic industries receive generous state support. Favoured businesses enjoy privileged access to government contracts. Tariffs and subsidies return as instruments of national policy rather than economic necessity.

The market survives, but competition becomes increasingly political. Economic nationalism serves another purpose beyond protecting domestic industries. It reinforces the narrative that international

commerce has become a battlefield rather than a network of mutual benefit. Supply chains are framed as vulnerabilities. Foreign investment becomes suspect unless politically useful. Immigration is discussed almost exclusively through the lens of economic competition and cultural displacement.

Protectionism acquires moral significance. National identity similarly undergoes transformation. Traditional patriotism celebrated shared citizenship regardless of political disagreement. The new nationalism is considerably narrower. It defines belonging through cultural conformity, historical grievance and perceived loyalty to the governing project. Those who criticise the government are frequently portrayed not simply as political opponents but as enemies of the nation itself.

The distinction matters enormously. Once dissent becomes synonymous with disloyalty, democratic pluralism begins to appear illegitimate. Journalists become activists. Academics become propagandists. Judges become conspirators. Opposition parties become foreign agents. Every independent institution risks being interpreted as part of a coordinated establishment resisting the authentic will of the people.

Politics becomes existential. Perhaps the most in-

triguing feature of this emerging order is that it is neither fully nationalist nor genuinely isolationist. Although these governments loudly proclaim national sovereignty, they increasingly cooperate across borders. They exchange campaign strategies, media tactics, legal innovations and digital technologies. Political consultants, sympathetic think tanks and alternative media networks operate internationally, reinforcing remarkably similar narratives despite radically different domestic contexts.

This reactionary internationalism may be one of the defining paradoxes of the twenty-first century. Leaders who denounce globalism simultaneously participate in their own form of ideological globalisation. Their common language includes hostility towards liberal institutions, scepticism of multiculturalism, suspicion of independent expertise and promises to restore traditional values.

The alliance is cultural rather than territorial. Social conservatism provides the emotional glue holding this coalition together. Questions surrounding gender, education, religion and national history become symbols of civilisational survival. Cultural disputes assume disproportionate political importance because they are easier to personalise than debates

over taxation or industrial policy. Every school curriculum becomes a battlefield. Every museum exhibition becomes a political statement. Every judicial ruling becomes evidence of cultural decline or national renewal.

Politics shifts from governing economies to defining identities. What makes this hybrid model particularly resilient is its ability to absorb crises rather than be weakened by them. Economic downturns justify stronger state intervention. Security threats validate expanded executive authority. Migration pressures reinforce nationalist rhetoric. International criticism confirms narratives of foreign persecution. Failure itself becomes evidence that hostile forces are obstructing national greatness.

Every challenge strengthens the story. This adaptability explains why the phenomenon cannot simply be dismissed as another passing populist wave. It represents an evolving model of governance capable of functioning within formally democratic systems while gradually altering their liberal foundations. Elections continue. Constitutions remain. Parliaments convene. Yet the spirit of constitutional democracy becomes increasingly hollow as institution-

al independence erodes and political competition loses its fairness.

The danger therefore lies not in the dramatic collapse of democracy but in its careful redesign. History rarely repeats itself with identical costumes. The authoritarianisms of the last century marched in uniforms and announced themselves with unmistakable certainty. Their twenty-first-century successors arrive carrying ballot boxes, constitutional amendments, patriotic slogans and promises to defend ordinary citizens against corrupt elites. They do not reject democracy outright. They redefine it until its restraints disappear.

That may prove to be the most successful political innovation of the modern age and one of its most dangerous.

The Visegrád formula

For decades, political commentators assumed that Europe's future would be written in the language of liberal democracy, open markets and ever-deeper integration. Hungary and Poland have challenged that assumption more effectively than any military alliance or revolutionary movement could have hoped. They have demonstrated that a government need not dismantle capitalism to reject liberalism, nor abandon elections to weaken democratic institutions. Instead, they have built something altogether different: an illiberal state that embraces markets when profitable, directs them when politically useful, and wraps both in the reassuring language of national tradition.

This is not a return to twentieth-century authoritarianism. Nor is it classical conservatism. It is a

distinctly twenty-first-century political model that blends state intervention, economic nationalism and cultural traditionalism into an ideological package that has become increasingly attractive to conservatives well beyond Central Europe.

Hungary under Viktor Orbán and Poland during the years dominated by the Law and Justice Party pioneered a political synthesis that many analysts initially misunderstood. Critics often described these governments simply as nationalist or populist. Yet those labels barely explain their durability. Their real achievement lay in constructing a political economy capable of satisfying both economic aspiration and cultural anxiety.

Contrary to simplistic caricatures, these governments did not reject capitalism. Foreign investment remained welcome, especially where it served national industrial ambitions. Manufacturing expanded. Infrastructure projects multiplied. Selected industries flourished under generous state guidance. Governments actively intervened in strategic sectors while maintaining many features of an open market economy.

This was not socialism in disguise. It was capitalism administered according to political priorities

rather than purely market logic. The state became less a neutral referee than an active shareholder in the national project. Yet economics alone never explained their popularity. The deeper innovation lay elsewhere.

Both governments recognised that cultural identity had become as politically valuable as household income. Large sections of society felt alienated by rapid social liberalisation, mass migration debates and the perceived moral uncertainty of modern Europe. Rather than dismissing these concerns as backward, Budapest and Warsaw transformed them into the foundation of state ideology.

The traditional family became not merely a social institution but a political one. Marriage incentives, child allowances, housing subsidies and generous tax benefits were increasingly directed towards families fitting a socially conservative ideal. Demographic decline became a patriotic challenge rather than merely an economic problem. Parenthood acquired civic significance.

Critics labelled this welfare chauvinism because social generosity was increasingly connected to national belonging and cultural conformity. Welfare was not abolished. It was redirected.

This distinction matters enormously. Unlike the neoliberal orthodoxy of previous decades, these governments understood that voters rarely oppose welfare itself. What many oppose is welfare perceived as detached from reciprocal obligations, national identity or traditional social structures.

By redefining welfare as an instrument of national renewal, rather than universal redistribution, Hungary and Poland created a powerful electoral coalition stretching from rural communities to significant portions of the urban middle classes.

The paradox is striking. Governments frequently criticised as radically neoliberal simultaneously expanded selected social programmes. Those portrayed as defenders of free markets showed little hesitation in intervening whenever national priorities demanded it. The result was neither laissez-faire economics nor traditional social democracy.

Instead emerged a selective welfare state operating alongside politically managed capitalism. This economic transformation could not have survived without institutional change.

Independent courts, public broadcasters, universities and civil society organisations gradually found

themselves subjected to increasing political pressure. Constitutional mechanisms designed to constrain executive authority were reinterpreted or weakened. Judicial appointments became deeply politicised. Public media increasingly reflected governmental narratives rather than independent journalism.

Supporters argued these reforms corrected decades of liberal bias inherited from post-communist transitions. Opponents saw systematic dismantling of democratic safeguards.

The truth is that institutional independence became increasingly subordinate to electoral legitimacy. Winning elections was presented as granting authority not merely to govern but to reshape every institution of the state.

Majoritarian democracy gradually displaced liberal constitutionalism. This represented perhaps the most significant philosophical departure from post-war European political consensus.

Liberal democracy traditionally rests upon two pillars, electoral legitimacy and institutional restraint. Hungary and Poland increasingly elevated the first while weakening the second.

The government became the embodiment of the national will rather than simply its temporary administrator.

Immigration further strengthened this political architecture. Both governments framed migration not primarily as an economic question but as one of civilisation, security and cultural continuity. Whether or not migration numbers justified such rhetoric mattered less than the emotional resonance it created.

Borders became symbols. National sovereignty acquired moral significance. European integration itself was not rejected outright but increasingly treated as acceptable only when compatible with domestic political priorities.

This tension exposed a broader crisis within the European Union. Brussels largely assumed economic convergence would eventually produce political convergence. Instead, economic integration coincided with growing ideological divergence.

Hungary and Poland demonstrated that prosperity does not necessarily generate liberal values. In some circumstances, rising prosperity can strengthen demands for cultural protection and national sovereignty.

That lesson continues to reverberate across Europe. The Visegrád model has inspired political movements from Italy to Slovakia, from France to the Netherlands. Not every conservative party wishes to replicate it entirely. Many remain committed to stronger constitutional safeguards. Yet its broader formula, combining selective welfare, economic nationalism, cultural conservatism and democratic majoritarianism, has become one of the defining political exports of Central Europe.

Its appeal lies precisely in its complexity. It rejects the binary choice between global neoliberalism and socialist redistribution. It offers voters both market growth and state protection, both national identity and social assistance, both democratic elections and a powerful executive.

Whether this formula ultimately proves sustainable remains uncertain. Ageing populations, fiscal pressures and increasingly confrontational relationships with European institutions pose serious long-term challenges. Political systems built around strong personalities also struggle with succession.

Nevertheless, dismissing Hungary and Poland as temporary aberrations would be a profound analytical mistake.

They have not merely governed differently. They have proposed an alternative understanding of democracy itself, one in which the nation, rather than the individual; the majority, rather than institutional restraint; and cultural continuity, rather than liberal pluralism, occupy the centre of political life.

That vision may alarm defenders of liberal democracy. But it has undeniably reshaped Europe's political imagination. The Visegrád formula is no longer simply a regional experiment. It has become one of the defining ideological blueprints competing for the continent's future.

The new right's pragmatic revolution

The old political map of Western Europe has become increasingly difficult to read. Labels that once appeared reliable, conservative, liberal, nationalist, neoliberal, Christian democratic, have blurred into something more complicated. Italy and Austria illustrate a transformation that extends well beyond their borders. What is emerging is neither a simple return to twentieth-century nationalism nor a continuation of the neoliberal consensus that dominated Europe after the Cold War. Instead, it is a hybrid political model that selectively borrows from both traditions while remaining fully committed to neither.

This new ideological synthesis has become one of the defining features of Western European politics. It has succeeded not because it offers intellectual con-

sistency, but because it promises practical answers to societies increasingly anxious about economic uncertainty, migration, demographic decline and national identity.

For decades, Europe's mainstream centre-right accepted a relatively straightforward formula: free markets, European integration, limited government intervention and gradual social liberalisation. Meanwhile, the far-right remained politically isolated, associated with historical memories that made broad electoral acceptance impossible.

Those barriers have steadily eroded. The success of Italy's governing coalition and the continued strength of Austria's Freedom Party demonstrate how ideas once considered politically toxic have become part of ordinary democratic competition. More remarkably, they have done so without abandoning electoral pragmatism. Rather than advocating revolutionary change, today's New Right presents itself as the defender of stability, order and national continuity.

Its greatest innovation lies in its economic flexibility. Classical neoliberalism insisted that markets should operate with minimal state interference. Yet many contemporary right-wing governments have discovered that voters increasingly expect govern-

ments to intervene, not less, but differently. Industrial policy, subsidies for strategic sectors, energy independence and protection of domestic producers are no longer viewed as ideological betrayals of free-market principles. Instead, they are portrayed as acts of national self-defence.

The state becomes simultaneously smaller and larger. It shrinks where welfare is believed to benefit outsiders or create dependency, yet expands when supporting domestic industries, protecting borders or defending strategic economic interests. This selective intervention allows governments to reject accusations of statism while satisfying public demands for greater security.

Migration has accelerated this transformation. The political centre long framed immigration primarily as an economic necessity or humanitarian responsibility. The New Right instead frames it as a question of cultural continuity and state capacity. Immigration policy therefore becomes inseparable from discussions about housing, schools, healthcare, crime and national identity.

This approach has proved electorally resilient because it speaks less about abstract ideology than

about visible everyday pressures. Economic policy follows a similarly hybrid logic.

Governments continue to support entrepreneurship, lower taxation for businesses and labour market flexibility. Yet they increasingly oppose unrestricted globalisation when it appears to threaten national manufacturing, agriculture or energy security. Free trade remains acceptable, provided it serves national interests.

The contradiction is only apparent. What critics describe as inconsistency, supporters see as realism. Markets are welcomed until they undermine national resilience. European integration is accepted until it limits domestic political choices. Global investment is encouraged until strategic industries appear vulnerable to foreign control.

This reflects a broader shift from ideological economics to geopolitical economics. National competitiveness now matters as much as market efficiency.

The COVID pandemic, supply-chain disruptions and geopolitical instability have strengthened arguments that governments cannot simply rely on invisible market forces. Strategic autonomy has become

fashionable across Europe, not only among conservatives but increasingly among centrists and even sections of the left.

The New Right has simply adapted faster. Social conservatism provides the movement's cultural foundation. Family policy, national history, Christianity and public order are presented as interconnected pillars of social cohesion. These themes are not always accompanied by radical legislative changes. Often, symbolism matters as much as policy itself.

Flags, monuments, national holidays, historical memory and educational curricula become political instruments through which governments define who belongs to the nation and what values deserve protection.

Critics frequently accuse these movements of exclusion. Supporters counter that every democratic society requires some shared cultural framework to maintain social solidarity. The debate therefore revolves less around whether national identity matters than around who has the authority to define it.

Europe's institutions increasingly find themselves caught between these competing visions. The Eu-

ropean Union was constructed around shared legal norms, economic integration and supranational cooperation. The New Right accepts membership but increasingly questions the political direction of integration. Sovereignty, rather than withdrawal, becomes the central demand.

Unlike earlier Eurosceptics, today's nationalist parties often seek to reshape the European project rather than dismantle it. This evolution makes them considerably more difficult for mainstream opponents to isolate. Perhaps the most significant consequence is psychological rather than institutional.

Ideas that once belonged to the political margins have entered everyday public debate. Border control, demographic anxiety, industrial protection and cultural identity no longer automatically define extremist politics. Instead, they increasingly form part of ordinary electoral competition across much of Western Europe.

The political centre has adjusted accordingly. Parties that once dismissed these concerns now frequently adopt modified versions of them, hoping to retain voters drifting towards more nationalist alternatives. In doing so, they unintentionally reinforce the New Right's intellectual victory.

The mainstream has not merely accommodated these movements. It has begun speaking their language. Italy and Austria therefore represent more than isolated national stories. They reveal how Western Europe's political landscape is being reordered around a new synthesis that rejects both pure neoliberal orthodoxy and traditional welfare-state consensus. Hybrid politics has become less an exception than an emerging norm.

Whether this represents democratic adaptation or democratic erosion remains fiercely contested. Yet one conclusion seems increasingly unavoidable. The future struggle in Western Europe will not be fought between left and right as they were once understood, but between competing versions of sovereignty, identity and state power in an age where ideological purity has given way to political pragmatism.

The revolt of the Anglosphere

History rarely announces the arrival of a new political era with a trumpet blast. More often, it begins with two election results that, at first glance, appear to be local rebellions. Britain's decision to leave the European Union in 2016 and Donald Trump's election to the White House the same year seemed, initially, to be separate expressions of national frustration. In retrospect, they were twin detonations beneath the foundations of the post-Cold War liberal order.

That they occurred almost simultaneously in the United Kingdom and the United States was no coincidence. These were the two nations that had done more than any others to construct, defend and export the international system that emerged after 1945 and expanded triumphantly after the collapse

of the Soviet Union. Together they championed free trade, military alliances, democratic institutions and an increasingly interconnected world. When their electorates revolted, the shockwaves travelled far beyond London and Washington.

Brexit and Trumpism did not merely produce new governments. They legitimised an entirely different political language. Words such as sovereignty, borders, national identity and global elites moved from the political margins into the mainstream. Ideas previously dismissed as nostalgic or reactionary suddenly became respectable campaign platforms.

For decades, the dominant political assumption across much of the Western world was that globalisation represented an inevitable destination rather than a policy choice. Economic integration would deepen. Immigration would increase. International institutions would gain influence. Trade barriers would continue to fall. Political leaders from both centre-left and centre-right largely disagreed only over how quickly these changes should proceed.

Brexit shattered the illusion of inevitability. The referendum demonstrated that a substantial proportion of voters no longer accepted the trade-off

between economic openness and national control. For millions, sovereignty was no longer an abstract constitutional concept but a practical question about who made decisions affecting everyday life.

Trump extended this rebellion across the Atlantic. His "America First" agenda challenged assumptions that had guided American foreign policy for generations. Alliances became transactions. Multilateral agreements became constraints rather than achievements. International organisations were portrayed as bureaucracies exploiting American generosity rather than institutions serving American interests.

Critics often dismissed both Brexit supporters and Trump's voters as motivated primarily by nostalgia or resentment. Such caricatures missed the deeper transformation underway.

Their political success reflected a widespread feeling that the promises of globalisation had been unevenly distributed. Metropolitan financial centres flourished while industrial towns declined. Highly educated professionals embraced international mobility while many working-class communities experienced economic insecurity, stagnant wages and cultural dislocation.

Immigration became the most visible symbol of these broader anxieties. Neither Brexit nor Trump created concerns about migration. Instead, they transformed immigration into the defining political issue through which wider frustrations about identity, security, housing, employment and public services were expressed. Whether these perceptions matched economic reality became almost irrelevant. Politics rewards emotional narratives more than statistical evidence.

The remarkable achievement of the emerging populist nationalist movement has been its ability to fuse economic nationalism with cultural conservatism into a coherent political identity.

Its leaders argue that global institutions undermine democratic accountability. International courts weaken national sovereignty. Human rights frameworks protect outsiders while constraining governments. Climate agreements impose economic burdens. Trade treaties enrich multinational corporations while hollowing out domestic industries.

This amounts to more than opposition to particular policies. It represents an attempt to construct an alternative vision of international politics, a coun-

ter-hegemonic project that rejects many assumptions underpinning the liberal international order.

Where liberals celebrate interdependence, nationalists celebrate autonomy. Where liberals prioritise universal rights, nationalists emphasise citizenship. Where liberals see multilateral institutions as safeguards against conflict, nationalists increasingly view them as obstacles to democratic self-government. This ideological shift has inspired political movements far beyond the English-speaking world.

From Europe to Latin America, from parts of Asia to growing sections of Africa, politicians increasingly borrow the rhetoric pioneered by Brexit campaigners and refined by Trump. They promise stronger borders, fewer international obligations and a restoration of national pride. Even leaders who reject Trump personally often imitate his political methods.

Social media has accelerated this diffusion. The old gatekeepers of public debate, newspapers, broadcasters and established political parties have lost their monopoly over political communication. Charismatic leaders now cultivate direct relationships with supporters, bypassing traditional institutions entirely. Political identity becomes less dependent upon policy detail than upon cultural belonging.

Ironically, this anti-globalist movement has itself become one of the most global political phenomena of the twenty-first century.

Its advocates exchange campaign strategies across continents. They appear at one another's rallies, conferences and media platforms. Nationalism, once rooted primarily within individual states, increasingly operates through an international network united by shared opposition to global governance.

This creates a striking paradox. A movement dedicated to restoring national sovereignty has developed transnational solidarity. Its supporters often speak of defending Western civilisation rather than simply protecting individual countries. Their critique of globalism has become, in effect, a global political language.

Whether this movement ultimately reshapes the international order remains uncertain. Political pendulums rarely swing permanently in one direction. Economic crises, demographic pressures and geopolitical conflicts may yet revive support for multilateral cooperation.

Yet something fundamental has already changed. Before 2016, the principal debates concerned how to

improve the liberal international order. After Brexit and Trump, the debate became whether that order should continue to exist in its current form at all.

That may prove their greatest historical legacy. They transformed what had appeared to be an uncontested settlement into a fiercely contested battlefield. The Anglo-American alliance, once the chief architect of liberal globalisation, unexpectedly became the birthplace of its most determined political opposition. In doing so, it unleashed forces that continue to redefine politics not only in Britain and America, but across the world itself.

The new national contract

For years, critics and supporters alike have misunderstood the economic ambitions of the new nationalist right. They have treated it either as a nostalgic revolt against capitalism or as a collection of angry slogans without a coherent economic philosophy. Both interpretations miss the point. Today's nationalism is not anti-capitalist. It is attempting something more ambitious and, potentially, more disruptive: reshaping capitalism so that markets serve the nation rather than the other way around.

The defining economic question of the twenty-first century is no longer whether governments should intervene in markets. That argument has already been settled by events. Financial crises, pandemics, supply-chain shocks, wars and geopolitical rival-

ry have buried the illusion that global markets can regulate themselves indefinitely. The real debate has shifted towards deciding who deserves protection and which industries should survive, regardless of market efficiency.

This is where the new nationalism finds its political opportunity. Rather than dismantling capitalism, nationalist movements seek to domesticate it. They are constructing an economic model in which free enterprise continues to exist, but only insofar as it strengthens national sovereignty, political stability and cultural cohesion. Profit remains welcome. Foreign dependence does not.

The result is a curious hybrid. It combines market liberalism with aggressive state intervention, free enterprise with industrial planning, and tax reductions with selective subsidies. Governments that once preached deregulation now happily choose industrial winners, subsidise strategic manufacturing, restrict foreign investment and intervene directly in supply chains.

This is not socialism. Nor is it traditional conservatism. It is capitalism with a passport. The contradiction is only apparent. Nationalists have concluded

that completely free markets produce politically unacceptable outcomes. Factories move abroad. Communities collapse. Immigration rises to satisfy labour shortages. Housing becomes unaffordable. Young people struggle to achieve the living standards enjoyed by their parents. Economic growth continues, yet many voters experience permanent insecurity.

In such an environment, promises of greater global integration sound increasingly detached from everyday reality. The answer proposed by the new right is not to abolish markets but to redefine their purpose. Economic policy becomes another instrument of national identity.

Protectionism therefore returns, not simply as an economic tool but as a political symbol. Tariffs are presented as patriotic acts. Domestic manufacturing becomes a matter of national security rather than comparative advantage. Supply chains are shortened not merely to improve resilience but to reduce dependence upon geopolitical rivals.

Industrial policy undergoes a similar transformation. For decades economists warned governments against attempting to pick winners. Today nearly every major economy does exactly that. Semicon-

ductor production, defence industries, artificial intelligence, pharmaceuticals, rare-earth minerals and energy infrastructure have become strategic assets worthy of public investment.

Ironically, nationalist governments are embracing economic planning once associated with the political left. Yet the defining feature of the new nationalism is neither tariffs nor subsidies. It is the creation of what might be called a new national contract.

Every successful political order depends upon an implicit agreement between the state and its citizens. The post-war settlement promised expanding welfare, secure employment and rising prosperity. The neoliberal era replaced that promise with opportunity, competition and global integration.

The nationalist contract offers something different. The state promises selective protection rather than universal prosperity. Certain industries become too important to fail. Certain regions receive preferential investment. Certain occupations gain political attention. Most significantly, many nationalist movements promise that native citizens will receive priority in employment, housing, welfare or public services.

This represents a profound shift in political philosophy. Citizenship increasingly becomes an economic category rather than simply a legal one. Rights become linked to belonging.

Supporters argue that every nation has both the right and the obligation to prioritise its own citizens. They ask why governments should hesitate to protect domestic workers while multinational corporations move capital across borders without loyalty or restraint.

Critics see something more troubling. Selective protection inevitably produces selective exclusion. If economic security becomes conditional upon national identity, someone must define who belongs. The politics of economic protection easily evolves into the politics of cultural gatekeeping. Immigration, once discussed largely as a labour-market issue, becomes central to economic policy because it determines who benefits from the national contract.

This helps explain why immigration occupies such a prominent position in nationalist politics even when economic conditions improve. The issue is no longer simply wages or employment. It concerns membership itself.

There is another paradox. The new nationalism often attacks global elites while remaining remarkably comfortable with domestic corporate power. Large national companies become strategic partners rather than opponents. Governments speak the language of competition while cultivating national champions capable of competing internationally.

Capitalism survives. Only its loyalties change. Whether this model succeeds remains uncertain. Protectionism raises prices. Industrial policy frequently wastes public money. Politically favoured industries can become permanently dependent upon subsidies. Shielding domestic firms from competition may reduce innovation precisely when technological change is accelerating.

Yet dismissing the new nationalism as economic ignorance would be equally misguided. It has identified genuine weaknesses in the global economic order. Hyper-globalisation concentrated wealth geographically, hollowed out manufacturing communities, weakened democratic accountability and convinced millions that economic efficiency mattered more than social stability.

The nationalist response may prove deeply flawed. It may create inefficiency, favouritism and exclusion

while sacrificing long-term growth. But it speaks to anxieties that orthodox economics too often treated as temporary inconveniences rather than structural failures.

The emerging economic settlement is therefore unlikely to resemble either the free-market triumphalism of the 1990s or the state socialism of the twentieth century. Instead, it points towards a world in which governments intervene more frequently, markets operate within increasingly national boundaries and economic policy serves strategic objectives as much as commercial ones.

The age of globalisation promised prosperity without borders. The age of the new nationalism promises security within them. Whether that promise can be fulfilled without undermining the openness upon which modern prosperity ultimately depends is likely to become one of the defining economic tests of our era.

Family values, political power

There was a time when appeals to the "traditional family" occupied a predictable corner of conservative politics. Today they have become something much larger: the emotional foundation of an emerging political order. Across Europe, the Americas and beyond, social conservatism has ceased to be merely one policy preference among many. It has become a political language through which anxieties about economics, immigration, national identity and globalisation are translated into a single, compelling story.

The family is no longer simply defended as a social institution. It is presented as civilisation's final fortress. This transformation explains why debates over marriage, gender identity, education, abortion or sex

education generate passions far exceeding their direct impact on most people's daily lives. Such issues have become symbols in a wider cultural conflict. They are portrayed not as isolated policy disagreements but as existential struggles between ordinary citizens and an elite supposedly determined to erase history, faith and tradition.

The political genius of this strategy lies in its simplicity. Complex economic frustrations are notoriously difficult to explain. Stagnant wages, declining industries, housing shortages, automation, global financial markets and demographic change all interact in ways that defy neat slogans. Cultural conflict, however, offers clarity. Instead of blaming abstract economic forces, politicians can point towards visible social changes and claim that a nation's troubles began when it abandoned its traditional values.

This is where anti-liberal narratives become remarkably effective. Liberalism is no longer criticised solely for expanding individual freedoms. Instead, it is accused of dismantling every institution that once gave society stability, religion, family, national identity, patriotism and even biological certainty itself.

Whether these accusations withstand serious examination often matters less than the emotional re-

assurance they provide. For many voters, rapid social change has coincided with genuine economic insecurity. Factories have closed. Stable employment has disappeared. Housing has become unaffordable. Young adults struggle to establish families of their own while older generations watch communities transformed by migration, technological disruption and declining public services.

These developments create fertile ground for a politics that promises not merely prosperity but restoration. The promise is deeply attractive because it suggests that decline is reversible. If national greatness was lost through cultural surrender, then it can supposedly be recovered through cultural renewal.

The traditional family therefore becomes more than a private arrangement. It becomes a national project. Children become symbols of demographic survival. Parenthood becomes patriotic duty. Marriage becomes resistance against cultural decay. Religious practice becomes proof of national authenticity. Every family dinner, every church service and every birth is transformed into an act of political significance.

Opponents are cast not simply as ideological rivals but as threats to civilisation itself. This moral framing

produces extraordinary electoral loyalty. Economic disappointments that might otherwise weaken governments are often forgiven if leaders continue fighting visible cultural battles. Voters who feel ignored economically may nevertheless remain loyal because they believe someone is finally defending their values.

Identity frequently proves more durable than income. Critics often dismiss this politics as cynical manipulation, yet such a judgement risks overlooking why these messages resonate so deeply. Many citizens genuinely believe that communities have weakened, families have fragmented and social trust has eroded. Rising loneliness, declining birth rates and growing mental health problems reinforce perceptions that something fundamental has indeed gone wrong.

The mistake lies not in recognising these problems but in assuming that liberal freedoms alone created them. Modern societies are experiencing transformations driven by technological revolution, demographic ageing, global markets and digital communication on an unprecedented scale. Blaming every social disruption on feminism, multiculturalism or LGBTQ rights offers an emotionally satisfying expla-

nation precisely because it avoids confronting these far more complicated realities.

Simple enemies make for simple politics. Yet social conservatism rarely succeeds on cultural arguments alone. Its real electoral strength comes from combining moral certainty with economic populism. Protection of the family is paired with promises to protect jobs, revive manufacturing, restrict immigration, defend pensions and shield domestic industries from foreign competition.

Culture and economics become inseparable. The message is clear: your wages declined because your nation lost confidence. Your community disappeared because elites embraced globalism. Your children cannot afford homes because politicians cared more about international ideals than local families. Restore traditional values and economic revival will naturally follow.

Whether these promises can actually be fulfilled becomes almost secondary. Politics increasingly revolves around belonging rather than measurable outcomes.

Progressive parties have often underestimated this emotional dimension. By focusing heavily on eco-

nomic statistics or technical policy solutions, they frequently overlook the human desire for continuity, identity and cultural stability. Telling anxious citizens that economic indicators are improving means little if they believe the society around them has become unrecognisable.

Facts rarely defeat feelings of displacement. This does not mean social conservatism possesses all the answers. The idealised traditional family celebrated in political speeches often ignores historical realities of inequality, domestic violence, limited opportunities for women and the diversity that has always existed within families themselves. Nostalgia can become a remarkably selective historian.

Nor does cultural unity automatically generate economic prosperity. Nations cannot simply legislate themselves back into the industries or demographic conditions of half a century ago.

Nevertheless, dismissing the politics of family values as mere reactionary sentiment would be a profound strategic mistake. It reflects genuine concerns about belonging, continuity and social cohesion that cannot simply be mocked out of existence.

The battle over the family is therefore not merely about marriage, religion or education. It is about competing visions of national identity in an age defined by uncertainty. One side presents diversity and individual freedom as society's greatest strengths. The other argues that only shared traditions and stable families can preserve social order.

That argument is likely to remain one of the defining political struggles of the twenty-first century. The family has become far more than a household. It has become one of politics' most powerful symbols and perhaps its most potent weapon.

The garden's unruly borders

For decades, the liberal international order rested upon a deceptively simple assumption: nations could disagree over interests while broadly agreeing on rules. Borders mattered, treaties mattered, institutions mattered, and even the most powerful states found advantage in pretending that international law carried moral authority. The system was never perfect. It was selective, occasionally hypocritical, and frequently manipulated by the strongest powers. Yet it possessed a degree of predictability that allowed diplomacy to function and middle powers to prosper.

That assumption is now under sustained assault, not merely by traditional authoritarian states but increasingly by political movements inside the democratic West itself.

What is emerging is not isolationism, despite the slogans. It is something more ambitious: a reactionary internationalism. Rather than withdrawing from global affairs, many New Right governments and populist movements seek to redesign the international order according to radically different principles. Their vision rejects universal norms in favour of civilisational blocs, transactional bargains and the unrestricted exercise of power.

This represents one of the most significant geopolitical shifts since the end of the Cold War.

The liberal order imagined sovereign equality, however imperfectly applied. The new order imagines hierarchy. Great powers determine outcomes within their respective neighbourhoods, while smaller states adjust accordingly. International institutions become useful only when they reinforce national objectives and disposable when they do not.

This philosophy is hardly original. It echoes the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe, the Cold War's rigid spheres of influence and even older imperial understandings that divided the world into zones of exclusive competence. What distinguishes its modern incarnation is that it is no longer promoted solely from Moscow or Beijing. Increasingly,

influential voices across Europe and North America question whether defending liberal values abroad serves any practical purpose.

Russia and China understand this intellectual opportunity perfectly. Neither country expects ideological conversion from Western conservatives. Instead, both benefit from a shared scepticism towards liberal universalism. Moscow champions national sovereignty while violating its neighbours' sovereignty. Beijing defends non-interference while steadily expanding its own influence. The contradiction matters less than the common objective: weakening the institutions that constrain power.

The resulting diplomatic compact is one of convenience rather than affection. Authoritarian governments welcome Western populists who criticise NATO, dismiss international courts, question sanctions, and reduce foreign policy to commercial calculation. In return, populist movements point to Russia, China or other authoritarian governments as examples of states that defend tradition, national identity and executive authority against what they portray as liberal decadence.

No formal alliance exists. None is necessary. Shared assumptions often matter more than shared treaties.

At the centre of this geopolitical transformation lies an older European metaphor that now feels increasingly fragile. Former European leaders famously described Europe as a carefully cultivated "garden" surrounded by a more dangerous "jungle". Critics rightly condemned the imagery as arrogant and colonial. Yet the metaphor nevertheless captured the Union's self-image: a rules-based community exporting stability through diplomacy, trade and law.

Today, however, the garden's greatest vulnerability lies not beyond its fences but within them. If member states cease believing that international rules deserve defending, the European project loses much of its strategic coherence. The European Union possesses limited military power compared with the world's largest states. Its influence derives disproportionately from regulatory authority, legal predictability and economic integration. Undermine faith in rules, and Europe gradually abandons the very instruments that made it influential.

Meanwhile, transactional diplomacy favours larger powers. In a world governed by permanent bargaining rather than established norms, military strength and economic leverage replace legal principle. Small and medium-sized countries discover that guaran-

tees become negotiable commodities rather than enduring commitments. Security turns into a subscription service, renewed only while payments continue.

Such a system may appear refreshingly realistic. It certainly dispenses with moral rhetoric. But realism often conceals instability. When every agreement becomes temporary, every alliance conditional and every border open to renegotiation, uncertainty becomes the defining feature of international politics. Investment declines, deterrence weakens and miscalculation grows more likely. Great powers may enjoy greater freedom, but everyone else inherits greater insecurity.

Ironically, many advocates of this new geopolitical settlement present themselves as defenders of order. Yet history suggests otherwise. Durable international systems emerge not because strong states face no constraints but because even strong states recognise the advantages of predictable behaviour. Rules are not obstacles to power; they are often its most effective insurance policy.

The liberal order undoubtedly requires reform. It has too often confused universality with Western preference and too frequently failed to uphold its own principles consistently. Acknowledging those

shortcomings, however, should not lead to embracing a world where power alone determines legitimacy.

The jungle has never disappeared. It merely became partially governed. Europe now faces an uncomfortable question. Does it remain committed to cultivating a rules-based garden despite its imperfections, or does it quietly accept that the fences have become obsolete? The answer will shape not merely European diplomacy but the character of the international system itself. Gardens survive through constant maintenance. Jungles require none at all.

The border within

Immigration has become the defining fault line of modern politics, not because the movement of people is unprecedented, but because it has become the arena where almost every contemporary anxiety converges. Economic insecurity, cultural identity, demographic change, terrorism, housing shortages, welfare pressures and the future of national sovereignty are now debated through the prism of migration. Few political subjects possess such extraordinary power to unite fears that were once considered separate.

This is the great political transformation of the twenty-first century. Immigration is no longer simply an administrative challenge for ministries of the

interior. It has become the ideological battlefield upon which the future of liberal democracy itself is being contested.

Across Europe, migration has evolved into the electoral issue capable of eclipsing inflation, taxation, healthcare and even foreign policy. Elections increasingly resemble referendums on borders rather than contests between competing economic programmes. Parties that once argued over tax rates now compete over deportation figures. Governments celebrate reductions in asylum applications with greater enthusiasm than improvements in productivity.

This evolution is hardly accidental. Europe has spent decades struggling to reconcile humanitarian commitments with political realities. Large-scale migration coincided with sluggish economic growth, declining trust in institutions, widening regional inequalities and repeated security shocks. Every crisis reinforced another. Terrorist attacks, integration failures in some urban neighbourhoods, housing shortages and overstretched public services gradually fused in the public imagination into one overarching narrative: that immigration symbolised a political elite losing control.

Whether every aspect of that narrative withstands empirical scrutiny has become almost irrelevant. Politics rarely rewards statistical nuance. It rewards emotional clarity.

That emotional clarity has been supplied by a new generation of nationalist movements which argue that borders are not merely geographical boundaries but moral ones. Their central claim is elegantly simple: a nation cannot sustain generous welfare systems, social solidarity or democratic legitimacy if citizenship loses its meaning.

From this argument emerges the increasingly influential doctrine of welfare chauvinism. Unlike classical conservatism, which focused primarily on reducing state intervention, welfare chauvinism accepts an expansive welfare state, but only for those regarded as members of the national community. Benefits, housing, healthcare and public resources become privileges of citizenship rather than universal entitlements. Immigration therefore becomes not only a question of who enters but who deserves collective solidarity.

This represents one of the most significant ideological innovations of contemporary politics. Old political divisions separated advocates of free markets

from defenders of social democracy. The emerging divide separates advocates of universal rights from defenders of national preference.

It is a remarkably potent electoral formula. Working-class voters who once supported centre-left parties increasingly find themselves attracted to parties promising both economic protection and cultural preservation. They are offered state support alongside tougher immigration policies. Economic nationalism and cultural nationalism become mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory.

Traditional parties struggle to respond because they remain intellectually trapped within political categories that no longer correspond to public sentiment. The European Union illustrates this dilemma with particular clarity.

The Union was designed around the free movement of goods, capital, services and people. Its institutional architecture assumes that integration naturally produces prosperity and social cohesion. Yet migration has exposed the limits of that assumption.

The refugee crisis of 2015 did more than overwhelm administrative systems. It fundamentally altered public expectations. Citizens increasingly

questioned who exercised authority over borders. Governments blamed Brussels. Brussels blamed national governments. Courts intervened. International conventions imposed obligations. Human rights frameworks constrained deportations. The resulting complexity created an overwhelming impression that nobody truly governed migration.

Nothing fuels populism more effectively than the perception of political helplessness. Consequently, demands for stronger border controls have become symbolic expressions of democratic restoration. Physical barriers, maritime patrols, offshore processing centres and accelerated deportations are presented not simply as immigration policies but as demonstrations that governments remain capable of governing.

Control itself has become the political product. Yet exclusion alone cannot resolve Europe's deeper challenge. Every developed European society faces ageing populations, shrinking workforces and persistent labour shortages. Hospitals, agriculture, logistics, construction and elderly care increasingly depend upon migrant workers. Economically, immigration remains difficult to replace. Politically, however, it has become increasingly difficult to defend.

This contradiction lies at the heart of Europe's paralysis. Governments simultaneously promise lower immigration while quietly expanding work visas. Businesses lobby for skilled migrants even as politicians campaign against migration. Public discourse condemns dependence upon foreign labour while economic reality quietly reinforces it.

Assimilation therefore becomes the neglected half of the debate. Successful immigration has historically depended less upon numbers than upon confidence that newcomers gradually become members of the national community. Shared language, civic participation, employment and acceptance of constitutional norms once formed the foundation of integration.

Today, however, multiculturalism and assimilation are increasingly portrayed as incompatible philosophies rather than complementary processes. Critics argue that multiculturalism encourages permanent cultural separation, weakening national cohesion and creating parallel societies. Supporters counter that forced assimilation ignores diversity and risks marginalising minorities. Between these competing visions lies an uncomfortable reality: neither complete cultural uniformity nor permanent fragmentation offers a sustainable model for democratic societies.

The question is no longer whether immigration should occur but how societies preserve social trust while accommodating demographic change. Europe has yet to formulate a convincing answer.

Instead, political debate increasingly oscillates between moral absolutism and political absolutism. One side presents restrictive immigration as inherently xenophobic. The other portrays virtually every migrant as a civilisational threat. Both caricatures impoverish democratic discussion.

The electorate, meanwhile, has moved elsewhere. Many voters now seek neither open borders nor sealed frontiers. They seek predictability, fairness and confidence that immigration occurs according to democratic consent rather than institutional drift.

This may ultimately explain why immigration has become the nexus of the new politics. It compresses abstract questions of identity, sovereignty and economic security into immediate human realities visible in every neighbourhood, school, hospital and workplace.

The border is no longer merely a line separating states. It has become the psychological frontier separating competing visions of what a nation is, whom

it belongs to, and whether liberal democracies retain the confidence to define themselves before others define them instead.

The west's new political weather

For much of the modern era, the political imagination of the West rested on a familiar architecture: liberal democracy, market capitalism, the nation-state and a broad social consensus that, despite occasional crises, these foundations represented the direction of historical progress. Elections changed governments, but the basic rules of the game remained intact. Institutions mattered. Expertise had authority. International alliances were strategic necessities. The future was assumed to look broadly like an improved version of the present.

That assumption has now been shattered. Across the Atlantic world, a new political paradigm has emerged, not as a temporary rebellion against the establishment, but as a deeper transformation of politi-

cal identity, social expectations and national purpose. It is tempting to describe this moment as a reactionary wave, a backlash against globalisation, immigration, cultural liberalism and economic inequality. Yet such a description, while partially accurate, misses the larger historical movement underway. The West is not simply experiencing a revolt against the old order; it is witnessing the construction of a new one.

The central question is whether this emerging system represents a decline of liberal democracy or an evolution of democracy itself.

The answer may depend on which definition of democracy one chooses to defend.

The old Western model was built around institutions designed to limit power: independent courts, professional bureaucracies, free media, constitutional restraints and international agreements. Its defenders argued that democracy was not merely majority rule but a complex balance between popular sovereignty and institutional protection.

The new political movements gaining influence across Western societies increasingly reject that distinction. They argue that institutions have become detached from ordinary citizens, that expert-driven

governance has replaced democratic accountability, and that national electorates have lost control over decisions affecting their daily lives. Their promise is not necessarily less democracy, but a different democracy, one that places national identity, cultural cohesion and direct popular authority above institutional constraints.

This shift has produced a political coalition that would have seemed improbable a generation ago. Elements of the traditional right, working-class voters once associated with social democratic parties, nationalist movements and sceptical voices within conservative politics have increasingly found common ground. Their shared argument is that the previous political settlement benefited global elites while leaving ordinary citizens carrying the costs.

Whether this coalition can sustain itself remains one of the great political questions of the age. Supporters describe it as a democratic correction: a necessary challenge to a system that became too distant, too technocratic and too confident in its own assumptions. They argue that Western societies require a new social contract, one that prioritises economic security, borders, cultural confidence and national resilience.

Critics see something more troubling: a retreat from the principles that made Western democracy distinctive. They warn that movements claiming to restore popular control can weaken the very institutions that protect citizens from arbitrary power. They argue that nationalism, when elevated above pluralism, risks turning democracy into a competition between permanent winners and permanent outsiders.

Both perspectives contain elements of truth. The future of the West will not be determined simply by whether these movements win elections. Their deeper achievement has already occurred: they have changed the questions being asked. Immigration, sovereignty, industrial decline, cultural identity and distrust of elites have moved from the margins to the centre of political debate. Even opponents have been forced to respond.

Politics is rarely transformed by one party or one leader. It changes when a society's assumptions change. The emerging political landscape may therefore be understood as a struggle between two competing visions of the West. The first sees the future as increasingly interconnected, multicultural and governed through international cooperation. The second sees the future as requiring stronger national

identities, greater sovereignty and a return of political power from global institutions to domestic electorates.

Neither vision has achieved dominance. The possibility of a transatlantic counter-hegemonic coalition, a network of political forces challenging the previous liberal consensus across North America and Europe, represents perhaps the most significant development of this era. It does not necessarily share a single ideology, but it shares a conviction that the previous order has reached its limits.

Yet political movements built primarily around opposition face a difficult transition. It is easier to dismantle an old consensus than to construct a new one. Anger can win elections; governing requires compromise, competence and a coherent vision of the future.

The great test for these new movements will be whether they can move beyond cultural confrontation and offer practical solutions to the challenges facing Western societies: ageing populations, technological disruption, economic inequality, climate pressures and geopolitical competition.

The West is not simply debating policies. It is debating identity. What does it mean to be a democratic society in an age when citizens distrust institutions but still demand their protection? What does sovereignty mean when economies, technologies and security threats cross borders? Can the nation-state remain the central political unit while the world becomes increasingly interconnected?

These are not questions with easy answers. The concepts of democracy and the nation-state have never been fixed. They have evolved through revolutions, economic transformations and social upheavals. The democracy of the 21st century may not resemble the democracy of the late 20th century. The nation-state of tomorrow may not operate according to the assumptions of yesterday.

The danger lies not in change itself, but in refusing to recognise its scale. The West is entering a new political era. Whether it becomes a period of democratic renewal or democratic decline will depend on whether its societies can reconcile competing demands: freedom and order, national identity and openness, popular power and institutional restraint.

The old political settlement is fading. The question now is not whether a new paradigm is arriving. It already has.

The question is whether the West can shape it or whether it will simply be shaped by it.

Post-Liberal Order

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